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PAGANISM

Biden proclaims October 11 as Indigenous Peoples' Day

By [Eric O. Scott](#) | October 8, 2021

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Earlier today, Joe Biden [issued a presidential proclamation](#) declaring that Monday, October 11th, shall be commemorated as Indigenous Peoples' Day in the United States. This is the first time the United States has recognized the holiday on a national level, following a number of states, municipalities, and tribal nations throughout the country making the decision to celebrate the day.



Performers at the Seattle Indigenous Peoples' Day celebration, 2014 [Seattle Municipal Archives, Wikimedia Commons, CC 2.0]

Biden's proclamation mentions the contributions of American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians, stating that these groups "have built vibrant and diverse cultures — safeguarding land, language, spirit, knowledge, and tradition across the generations." It goes on to affirm his administration's commitment to making "respect for Tribal sovereignty and self-governance the cornerstone of Federal Indian policy." The proclamation also notes the accomplishments of Indigenous communities during the pandemic, including that Indigenous people have one of the highest vaccination rates of any ethnic group.

Embed from Getty Images





SEATTLE, WA – OCTOBER 13: Nikk "Red Weezil" Dakota (R), from the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, celebrates with others from various tribes during Indigenous Peoples' Day events at the Daybreak Star Cultural Center on October 13, 2014 in Seattle, Washington. Earlier that afternoon, Seattle Mayor Ed Murray signed a resolution designating the second Monday in October to be Indigenous Peoples' Day. (Photo by David Ryder/Getty Images)

The proclamation also mentions, although it does not dwell on it, the history of colonization and genocide that Indigenous nations have faced in the United States:

Our country was conceived on a promise of equality and opportunity for all people — a promise that, despite the extraordinary progress we have made through the years, we have never fully lived up to. That is especially true when it comes to upholding the rights and dignity of the Indigenous people who were here long before colonization of the Americas began. For generations, Federal policies systematically sought to assimilate and displace Native people and eradicate Native cultures. Today, we recognize Indigenous peoples' resilience and strength as well as the immeasurable positive impact that they have made on every aspect of American society. We also recommit to supporting a new, brighter future of promise and equity for Tribal Nations — a future grounded in Tribal sovereignty and respect for the human rights of Indigenous people in the Americas and around the world.

Indigenous Peoples' Day is a counter-celebration to Columbus Day, an idea originally proposed in 1977 by the United Nations International Conference on Discrimination against Indigenous Populations in the Americas. The first official adoption of "Indigenous Peoples' Day" was in Berkeley, California, in 1992, the 500th anniversary of Columbus's expedition to the Americas, although two years earlier, in 1990, South Dakota replaced Columbus Day with "Native American Day."

The timing is meant to challenge the colonialist narrative of history taught to American students, namely that American history begins when Christopher Columbus "discovered" the Americas in 1492, and the marginalization of Indigenous people in our own time.

"Indigenous Peoples are left in the shadows of Euro-America's destiny," says Sarah Shear, assistant professor of Social Studies Education at Penn State University–Altoona, during a keynote speech at the Smithsonian's Museum of the American Indian, "while the cooperation and conflict model provides justification for the eventual termination of Indigenous Peoples from the American landscape and historical narrative."

Embed from Getty Images



Olin Tezcatlipoca (L) from the Mexica Movement marches with other demonstrators to a statue of Christopher Columbus during a protest against Columbus Day in Grand Park, Los Angeles,

California on October 11, 2015. The Mexica Movement is amongst a growing group of people and US cities that want change the name of the 'Columbus Day' holiday to 'Indigenous Peoples Day. AFP PHOTO / MARK RALSTON (Photo credit should read MARK RALSTON/AFP via Getty Images)

"Celebrating Columbus and other explorers like him," says the museum's *Native Knowledge 360* project, "dismisses the devastating losses experienced by Indigenous Peoples of the Western Hemisphere in the past and the ongoing effects of colonialism today." According to the museum, Indigenous people in the Americas lost 95% of their population following European colonization.

President Biden's proclamation does not replace Columbus Day, which is a federal holiday enacted by Congress, although many of the state and municipal recognitions of the holiday do outright replace Columbus Day. In a separate proclamation, Biden celebrated the contributions of Italian immigrants and their descendants to the United States, but also noted the "painful history of wrongs and atrocities that many European explorers inflicted on Tribal Nations and Indigenous communities."

While Indigenous Peoples' Day is meant as a challenge to a historical narrative that centers Columbus and other European colonizers, it is also meant to draw attention to the contemporary contributions and struggles of Indigenous America. Dr. Shear's project noted that in most U.S. history standards, the vast majority of references to Indigenous peoples is pre-1900. For many non-Indigenous Americans, Indigenous peoples seem to be part of the past, rather than living individuals in modern America. And as *The Wild Hunt* has covered, even today Indigenous people face challenges to their history, culture, and religious beliefs. This includes an often uneasy relationship with modern Pagans, given the history of Pagans who let a romantic conception of Native spirituality give way to religious appropriation.

According to the Associated Press, the president's decision today took many Indigenous activists by surprise.

"This was completely unexpected. Even though we've been talking about it and wanting it for so long," Hillary Kempenich, an artist and member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, told the Associated Press. "I'm kind of overwhelmed with joy."

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ABOUT ERIC O. SCOTT



Eric O. Scott was raised by witches. He writes about his life as a second-generation Pagan, pilgrimage, pop culture, and politics. He is the Pagan Perspectives Editor for *The Wild Hunt* and a contributing editor for *Killing the Buddha*. His first novel, *The Lives of the Apostates*, was published in 2013 by Moon Books. He has an MFA in creative writing from the University of Missouri - Kansas City and a PhD in English from the University of Missouri - Columbia. His middle name is not "Odin."

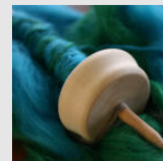


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A. Marina Fournier · 17 hours ago

Yippiel It was instituted in Berkeley in 1992, and spread.

California as a State failed to pass a bill for this in 2015, but it was finally adopted in 2019, as Native American Day, on the fourth Friday of September, under Governor Gavin Newsom.

I wish it had been IPD on 12th October: perhaps one day it will, and allow the September holiday to be for Indigenous Californians.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›


mdyer · 15 hours ago

You know as a kid I never connected Columbus Day with Italian Americans. It was all about the 3 ships and the "discovery" of America. We were never taught about plagues, killings or slavery perpetrated against the Native folks, either. I just looked at the Wikipedia entry for Columbus Day and it says the roots of the holiday followed a lynching of Italian immigrants in Louisiana. Assuming that's true it really shows how strange the crucible of race, identity and class warps things here in America.

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›


Poseidonas Ouranios → mdyer · 12 hours ago · edited

Indeed, thanks for making me check on it...such a weird/ironic turn of events...besides in my European mind we usually associate Columbus to Spanish Crown conquest and power than his Italian origins...such a convoluted and twisted canvas on which so much violence and ubris is projected...

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›


Govannon Thunorwulf · 15 hours ago

Unfortunately, I know that there are still many people that will have an issue with this.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›


Foxnose · 11 hours ago

Kind of a half step. Half step is an advance, but then turning around and basically, "Don't worry, genociders, we still love you" in the next breath is untoward.

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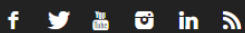
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